

USAWC STRATEGY RESEARCH PROJECT

THE SPANISH BLUE DIVISION

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## ABSTRACT

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This paper summarizes the life and experiences of the Spaniards that fought on the German side during World War II. It starts with the political situation in Spain when Germany attacked Russia in 1941, and the important 1941 speech of Serrano Suñer (Minister of Foreign Affairs, Falange leader, and Franco's brother-in-law), which signified the starting point for the Blue Division. It deals with the enlistment, training and movement of the Division to the front line, some of the main battles, the repatriation of the Blue Division, and the creation and repatriation of the Blue Legion.



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## PREFACE

The Blue Division is probably the only well-known Spanish unit outside of Spain. References and studies exist in numerous countries and languages. These soldiers awaken admiration because they always faced, without the smallest complaint, an enemy superior in number as well as the terrible Russian winter, while maintaining their positions without having received orders to do so and taking their fearlessness to the extreme limit during the offensive. Accomplishments listed below give credit to the Blue Division, the last Spanish Expeditionary Unit.

- More than 12,000 casualties suffered by the Blue Division during the entire campaign.
- More than 49,000 casualties caused to the enemy.
- The Oak Leaves of the Knight Cross of the Iron Cross of General Muñoz Grandes.
- 135 First Class Iron Crosses.
- 2,362 Second Class Iron Crosses.
- 16 First Class Medals of Military Merit.
- 2,200 Second Class Medals of Military Merit.
- 8 San Fernando's Laurels Crosses (the highest Spanish medal for bravery).
- 53 Individual Military Medals (Spanish medal for bravery).

The Blue Division does not deserve Spain's, nor especially the Spanish Army's, indifference and ingratitude that continues to the present day. I have had no other objective in this research other than to reveal the history of heroism of the Blue Division and to place it in a preeminent position among the Spanish units that the Blue Division won with blood.





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## THE SPANISH BLUE DIVISION

Spain maintained neutrality before World War II. In 1939 Franco issued the following Decree of Neutrality:

Verifying the official state of war that, unfortunately, exists among England, France and Poland, on one side, and Germany on another, it is ordered, by the present decree, the strictest neutrality of the Spanish citizens, in agreement with the laws effective and the principles of public international law.

- Francisco Franco."

Burgos September 4, 1939 Year of the victory. <sup>1</sup>

Spain could not be involved in another war since its biggest concern was lifting itself from the most absolute ruin in which it rested after three years of destructive and bloody Civil War. In addition, Franco did not have the means or the weapons to undertake such an adventure. The pressures to which Franco had been subjected since the beginning of World War II were very strong from all sides. The Allies were threatening him to keep Spain to isolationism, the Germans were demanding that he take their side, the Spanish people were asking him loudly to help Germany, etc.

After studying the situation thoroughly, Franco decided to change the Spanish position from neutrality to non-belligerence. Spain proclaimed its non-belligerence on June 12, 1940. Indeed, although the United States never proclaimed non-belligerence, in practice it acted as such between 1940 and 1941, when Roosevelt declared that the United States would be the "arsenal of threatened democracies"<sup>2</sup> and proceeded to supply Britain with weapons and materiel.

To begin to speak of the Blue Division we have to look back to June 22, 1941. On this date, a military operation (BARBAROSSA) was initiated by the German Army against Russia. Three German Army Groups (A.G.), North, Center and South, commanded by the field Marshals Ritter Von Leeb, Von Bock and Von Runsted respectively. The objective of the attack was a line that went from Archangel through Stalingrad to the Caspian Sea. The North A.G. would go toward Leningrad, the Center toward Smolensk, leaving the South to destroy Kiev and take the Ukraine.

The news of the invasion of Russia by Germany spread quickly over all of Europe, arriving in Spain where people received it with great happiness. Why? This was scarcely two years since the Spanish Civil War had ended – a war in which Russia had helped the Republican and the Communist forces. The Spaniards had not forgotten this, and they thought that it was a

good opportunity to take revenge. The happiness overflowed when, on June 24, 1941 the Secretary of the Foreign Office, Ramón Serrano Suñer, pronounced, before thousands of inflamed Spaniards, his famous sentence "**Russia is guilty.**"

Comrades:

It is not an hour of speeches. But the Falange dictates in these moments its judgment of conviction: Russia is guilty!

Guilty of our Civil War. Guilty of the death of our founder José Antonio, and of the deaths of so many comrades, of so many fallen soldiers due to the aggression of Russian communism.

The extermination of Russia is a demand of the history and of the future of Europe."<sup>3</sup>

From that moment, a dilemma arose for General Franco – whether or not to send help to Germany. If he could not send help officially, at least he would not impede those who voluntarily wanted to help Germany. On June 27, 1941, four days after the invasion of Russia, Falange recruitment offices all over Spain opened for the enlistment of volunteers.

In a guideline issued June 28, it was specified that the command of the Blue Division would be in Army hands. All officers up to first lieutenant would come from the regular Army.<sup>4</sup> The mixture of regular Army elements and of Falange's militias would be from non-commissioned levels, although some officers were also Falangist. The total number of men that would comprise the Division would be eighteen thousand nine hundred and forty six<sup>5</sup>.

The recruiting offices closed on July 6, six days before the enlistment deadline, because the number of volunteers far exceeded the requirement.

Thus began the history of the Blue Division<sup>6</sup> to the Spanish, Blau Division to the Germans, 250 Division to the Wehrmacht (German Armed Forces), or Galubaya Divizia to the Russians.

## **ORGANIZATION OF THE DIVISION AND MARCH TO GRAFENWÖRH**

### **SELECTING THE DIVISION COMMANDER**

Soon, the Blue Division began to acquire political importance. The Blue Division played a key role in the internal politics of Spain between 1941 and 1944. In 1941, both the Army and the Falange foresaw the future importance of the Division and began vying for its control. Franco was aware of the approaching problem and knew that the commander of the Division should have combat experience, should be accepted by both the Army and the Falange, and must be

loyal to him. The Army and the Falange offered their candidates: the Falange supported its Secretary General José Antonio Girón, while the Army wanted a Civil War hero and proposed General José Moscardó Ituarte, General Rafael García Valiño and General Carlos Asensio Cabanillas. The Command went to Franco's choice, General Agustín Muñoz Grandes.

#### ORGANIZATION OF THE DIVISION

The Blue Division was organized according to the Spanish pattern: four regiments of infantry and one of artillery. The regiments were named for their first commanders, that is, Regiments Rodrigo, Pimentel, Esparza, and Vierna.

To clarify the integration of the Spanish unit in the Wehrmacht, a meeting was arranged in Berlin, from July 5-7, between a commission of the Spanish Army and the OKW (High Command of the Wehrmacht). At this meeting the Spanish commission was surprised by some of the intentions of the Germans:

- The Blue Division should be organized according to the German pattern: three regiments of infantry instead of four.
- Spain should provide the necessary equipment for communications, 300 trucks, and 400 motorcycles.
- Finally, it was agreed that the personnel surplus could form the reserve, and because Spain could not provide the communications equipment, trucks, and motorcycles previously mentioned, they would be provided by Germany<sup>7</sup>.

#### MARCH TO GRAFENWÖRH

On July 13, the first battalions boarded trains at North Station in Madrid. On July 23, the entire Division was gathered at Grafenwöhr, Germany. The Grafenwöhr training camp was 200 square kilometers, with 25 small compounds able to house a complete expeditionary unit (30,000-50,000 troops).

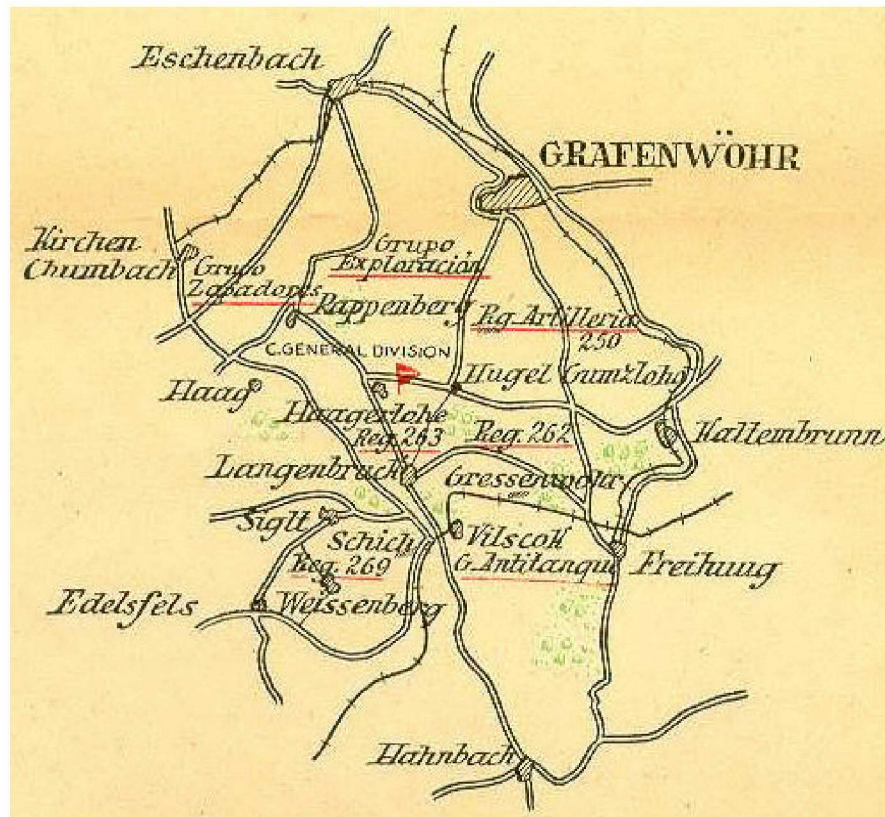


FIGURE 1<sup>8</sup>

The Germans considered three months as the minimum for the training of the Spanish unit. However, General Muñoz Grandes believed that the Division would need only one month, because between 75 and 80 percent of its men already had combat experience acquired in the civil War.

On July 25, General Muñoz Grandes signed, Operations Order No. 1 that delineated, the new organization: Staff; HQ (Military Police, and Motorized Platoon, Services); head office of weapons and logistics; three infantry regiments of: 262<sup>nd</sup> Colonel Pimentel, 263<sup>rd</sup> Colonel Vierna and 269<sup>th</sup> Colonel Martínez Esparza; 250<sup>th</sup> Regiment of Artillery; 250<sup>th</sup> Transmissions Group; 250<sup>th</sup> Deposit battalion (reserve) "The Aunt Bernarda"; 250<sup>th</sup> Exploration Group; 250<sup>th</sup> Transport Group; services of administration, health, audit, veterinary and pharmacy.

To the dismay of the Spaniards, the Germans decided not to motorize the Blue Division. Instead, they provided 5,610 horses for its transport. On August 20, hardly a month since the

last Spanish troops arrived, the first troops boarded the train toward the front, as General Muñoz Grandes had desired.

## THE VOLCHOV FRONT

### THE MARCH TO THE FRONT.

At first, the Blue Division was assigned to the Center Army Group, whose objective was Moscow. The *guripas* (name that the Spanish soldiers gave to themselves) left for the front by train. They were surprised when, on August 27, they disembarked in the Polish town of Grodno, about 1,000 kilometers from the front. They were surprised to learn they had to walk the rest of the way on foot.

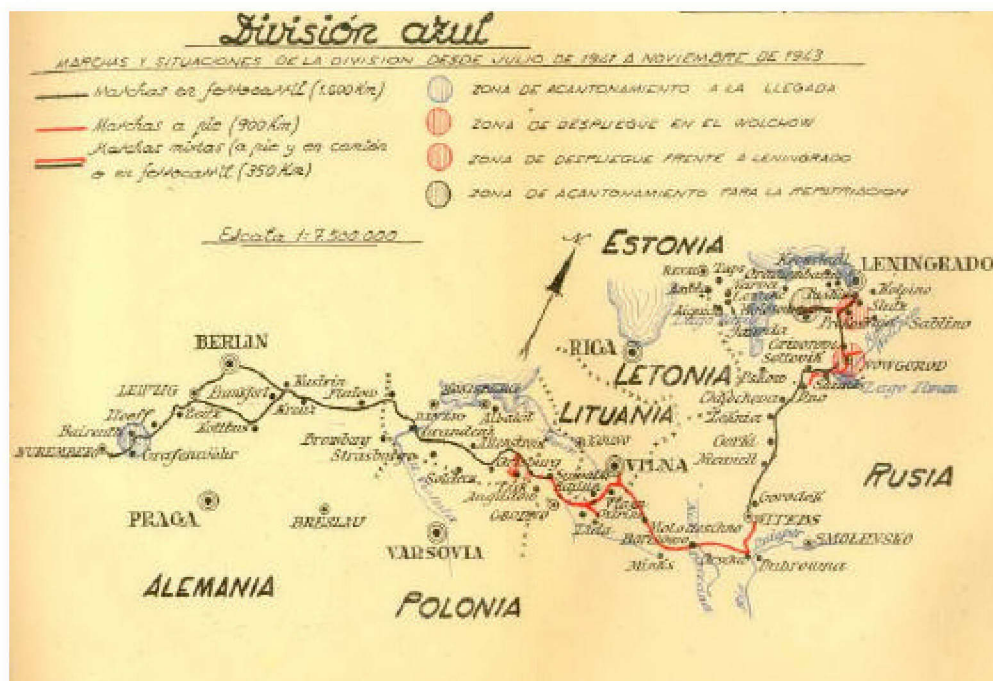


FIGURE 2<sup>o</sup>

Soon the difference between Germans and Spaniards was noticed. The Germans kept a neater appearance, had the better march formation, and did not interact with the civil population, etc.. The Germans were irritated by the affection the Spaniards had for the *panienkas* (Russian name for women) because the Germans believed that the Russians were inferior. The German complaints of the Spaniards' behavior did not take long to reach Hitler's ears. Even Marshal Von Kluge, commander of the 9<sup>th</sup> Army Corp, refused to admit the Blue Division to his unit.



While the patient *guripas* marched to the front, Hitler began to change the initial plans of Barbarossa. He gave priority to the South and North, halting the advance of the Center. He subtracted units from the Center, and sent them to reinforce the North and South Army Groups. As a consequence, on September 25, General Muñoz Grandes received, with deep displeasure, the order to reassign the Blue Division to the North, under the command of Field Marshal Ritter Von Leeb. He had expected to be with the units that conquered Moscow. The Blue Division was assigned to the First Army Corps (16<sup>th</sup> Army).

On September 30, after a meeting with General Von Leeb, General Muñoz Grandes was informed of the mission: to sustain a part of the line that formed the 16<sup>th</sup> Army (General Ernst Busch) between Lake Ladoga and Lake Seliger.

#### AT THE FRONT LINE.

The Blue Division entered the line, relieving two German divisions that had taken a lot of punishment from the Russians. This line extended along 40 kilometers toward the north from the banks of Lake Ilmen, to the village of Krasnil-Udarnik. General Muñoz Grandes saw that this line was too long to be covered. It was not possible to provide a deep defense because the Division was also part of the offensive force. He, therefore, divided the front into three sectors, assigning each to the three regiments.

The northern sector corresponded to the 269<sup>th</sup> Regiment between Krasny-Udarnik and Ugolki. The central sector corresponded to the 263<sup>rd</sup> Regiment between Ugolki to the north and the crossing of the highways to Grigorowo and Leningrad. And lastly, the southern sector corresponded to the 262<sup>nd</sup> Regiment from the aforementioned crossing of highways to Lake Ilmen. The Blue Division command post (C.P.) was located in the Kremlin of Novgorod. So, a great part of the logistical support of the Division was deployed in Novgorod.



FIGURE 3<sup>10</sup>

#### THE VOLCHOV RIVER BEACH HEAD.

On October 13, the Germans decided to resume operations to isolate Leningrad. The 16<sup>th</sup> Army was assigned to take control of the railroad hub of Tikhvin, and to connect later with the Finns at the Svir River. The plan was for the 126<sup>th</sup> Division (16<sup>th</sup> Army), located to the north of the Blue Division, to cross the Volchov in Kuzino, and as soon as it established a beach head for the waiting units, it would rotate toward the south on the eastern bank of the river to support the crossing of the Blue Division near Nogorov.

On October 14, General Muñoz Grandes ordered Colonel Esparza, commander of the 269<sup>th</sup> Regiment to begin a series of reconnaissance missions of the eastern bank of the Volchov, for the purpose of establishing a beach head. The attack was intended to attract the Russians' attention and disguise the true operation, which would be launched north of the Blue Division sector.

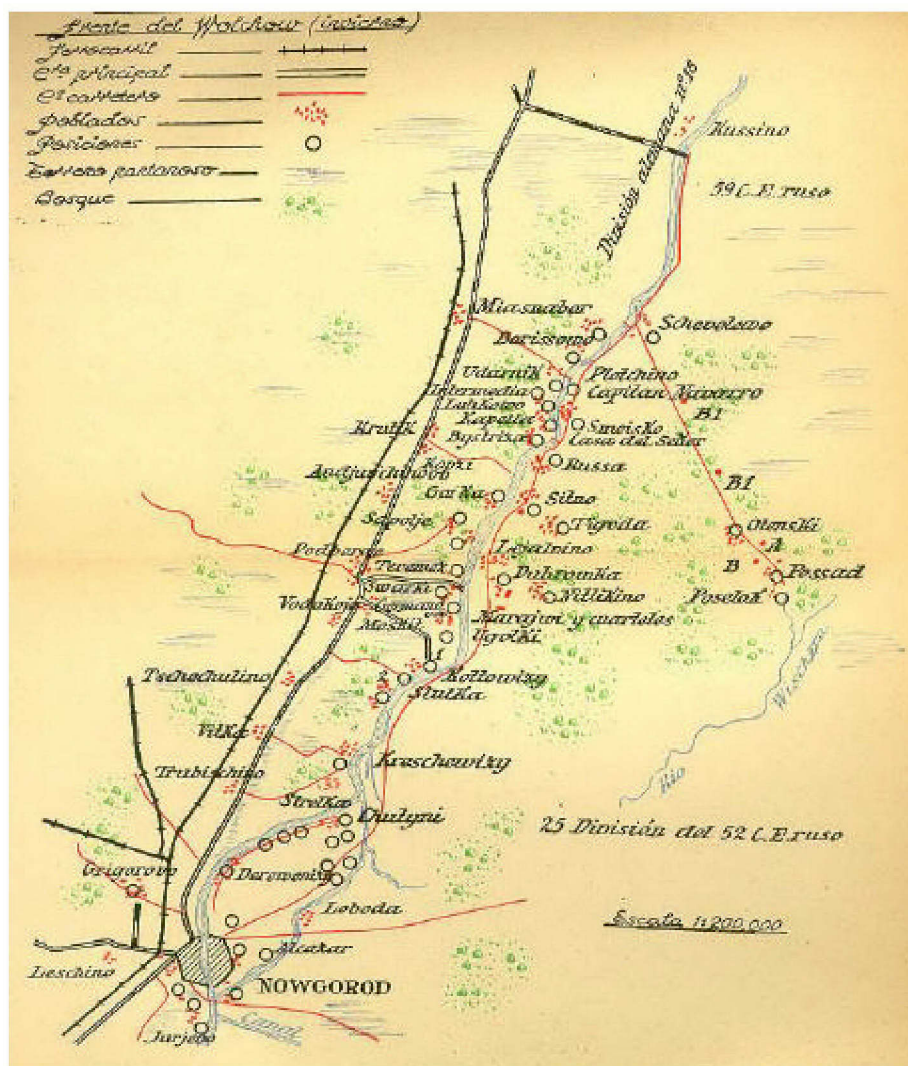


FIGURE 4<sup>11</sup>

On October 20, an attack was carried out on the eastern bank and the II Battalion (269<sup>th</sup> Regiment) established a position near Udarnik. The same day the II Battalion met the Germans in Schevelevo and went south to expand their position and captured Smeisko. From Smeisko, the II Battalion went south to capture Russa the following day. On October 22, the II Battalion was ordered to continue the advance to the south, and the same day, after bloody combat, the village of Sitno was captured.

The III Battalion (263<sup>rd</sup> Regiment) and the Aunt Bernarda (reserve of the Division) crossed the Volchov following the II Battalion's crossing, and took positions south of Sitno. On October 28, the III Battalion, captured the village of Tigoda, and the Aunt Bernarda occupied the village of Dubrowka, and on the following day the village of Nitlikino was taken. With these actions the Spanish offensive concluded on the eastern bank of the Volchov. Once the offensive for the attainment of the beach head was concluded, the number of Spanish troops on the eastern bank of the Volchov reached 4,000 men.

#### THE INTERMEDIATE POSITION.

On December 27, at 0300 hours, the 1002<sup>nd</sup> and 1004<sup>th</sup> Russian Regiments rushed the Spanish positions at Lubkovo and Urdanik, but they stumbled upon a position, defended by Second Lieutenant Rubio Moscoso, that received the name of "The Intermediate". In the face of the importance of the position and of the force of the Russian attack, General Muñoz Grandes gave the order to resist and not to retreat, and stated: "resist as if you were nailed to the land".

The force ratio was so disproportionate that "The Intermediate" fell to Russian hands, but during the same day the Spanish forces were able to recover the position. The scene that they saw there was devastating. Expressions of horror and indignation filled their faces. The second lieutenant and the soldiers who defended the position appeared semi-nude and nailed to the land with picks and rifle bayonets. The order had been completely fulfilled "as nailed to the land".

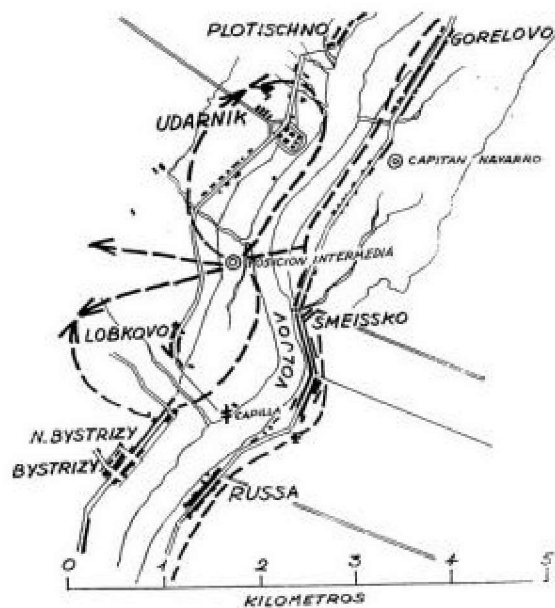


FIGURE 5<sup>12</sup>

## THE LENINGRAD FRONT

### RELIEF BATTALIONS

Beginning in December 1941, the reports received in Spain about the situation of the Blue Division began to worry Franco seriously. The Division had left Spain heading for victory, but now the war threatened to become a long conflict with an uncertain future. The reports prepared by the Spanish General Staff revealed the continuous worsening of the tactical situation of the Spaniards. Franco complained of the losses of so many men, losses that were also qualitatively important for the régime because most of the first *guripas* were junior and senior leaders of the Falange (the political party that provided ideological support for the regime).

The Blue Division was already an outstanding element of the internal politics of Spanish life. It is not an exaggeration to say that its popularity and its heroic halo made it a tempting target for manipulation. The Falange was already feeling the effect of the long absence of numerous leaders enrolled in the Division. In January 1942, Franco made a decision: he ordered the Spanish ambassador in Berlin to request on his behalf the temporary withdrawal of the Division from the lines in order to re-equip and relieve it. The Germans refused the request, blaming their refusal on weather conditions.

Although Germany did not relent on the subject of the Division's repatriation, General Asensio Cabanillas received the authorization to send 400 men every 10 days to cover the casualties and to replace certain important Falange leaders.<sup>13</sup>

The recruiting offices were opened once again, but without the great publicity of the initial recruitment. Franco did not want to appear hostile to the Allies. On this occasion the Army replaced the Falangists in the organization of new recruits. The responsibility for recruiting fell upon General Esteban Infantes, who would later become the new commander of the Division.

#### RELIEF OF COMMAND IN THE BLUE DIVISION.

With the onset of the Hispanic-German negotiations for the relief of the Blue Division, one of the darkest chapters in the Spanish adventure in Russia opened. In the face of the importance and reputation that the Blue Division had acquired, and the popularity of its General, it was not a surprise that monarchists, Falangists, the Spanish military, the German Secret Service, and even Hitler tried to attract General Muñoz Grandes to their respective causes. For various reasons, these groups were not satisfied with Franco and started secretly looking for a new leader.

From May through the end of 1942, numerous conspiracies to overthrow Franco took place. These conspiracies were carried out by monarchists, unhappy radical sectors of the Falange and even the German Secret Service. Franco saw the popularity of General Muñoz Grandes unceasingly grow and how it could become a double-edged sword, both in Franco's favor and against it. Franco insisted on bringing General Muñoz Grandes back to Spain. His replacement was the aforementioned General Esteban Infantes.

Although some historians defend the theory that General Muñoz Grandes offered Hitler Spain's commitment to officially enter the war (Hitler- Muñoz Grandes interview, July 12, 1942), General Muñoz Grandes' loyalty to Franco makes this theory doubtful. Finally Hitler realized that he could not substitute Franco; neither would Muñoz Grandes be the toy that he wanted in his hands.

At the beginning of December 1942, General Muñoz Grandes was relieved of his command. Before Muñoz Grandes returned to Spain, Hitler awarded him the Oak Leaves of the Knight's Cross of the Iron Cross, a badge that only one other foreign general had ever been awarded. On December 17, General Muñoz Grandes was received with great affection by the crowd in Madrid. Franco promoted General Muñoz Grandes to Lieutenant General and awarded him the highest medal of the Falange; the Silver Palm. In 1943, Lieutenant General Muñoz Grandes was posted as Franco's Chief of his "military house", and became his closest advisor.



## CHANGE OF FRONT

The summer of 1942 was favorable to the German offensive. They captured the Crimea and the VI Army's advance to Stalingrad seemed unstoppable. On July 23, Hitler decided to make the final push to Leningrad. The North A.G. would take the city in the first days of September. The operation received the code name of "North Light".

The Volchov sector remained calm. Hitler wanted to involve the Blue Division in a victory in order to win Spanish popular support and, hopefully, force Franco's formal commitment to the war. This fact could be the taking of Leningrad, besides before his departure; Muñoz Grandes had already requested the change of the Division to a more active front.

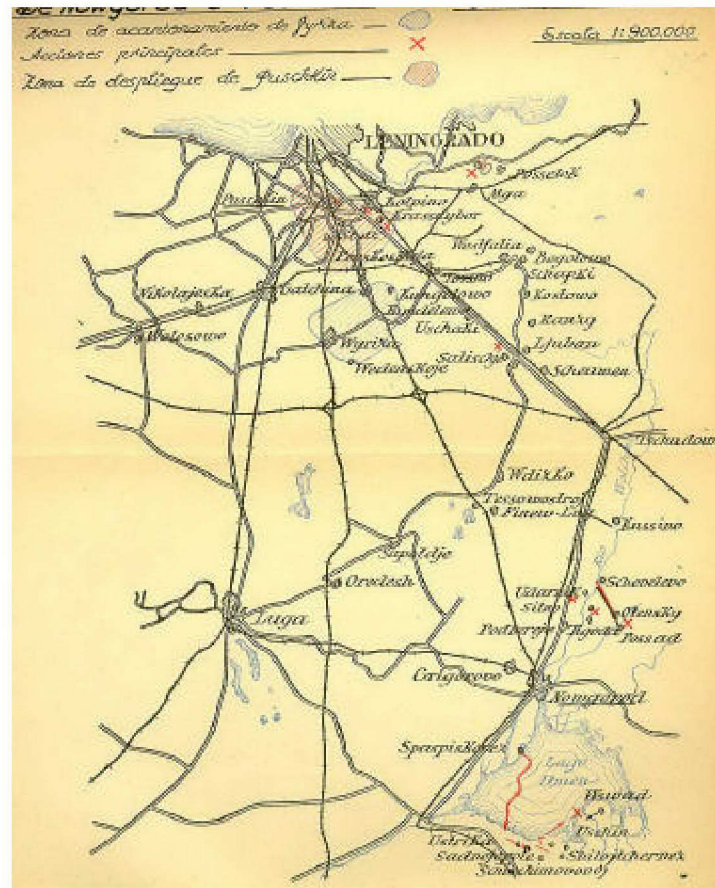


FIGURE 6<sup>14</sup>

General Georg Lindeman, commander of the 18<sup>th</sup> Army, opposed losing the Blue Division. This was not only an outstanding unit from a military point of view, but was also combat ready after the end of the reliefs. On the other hand, Hitler had decided to increase the number of divisions by reducing their number of battalions and reorganizing. This measure did not apply to the Blue Division, and it became one of the most powerful units on the front. On August 19, General Esteban Infantes received the order to give the sector to the 20<sup>th</sup> Motorized Division. The Division would assemble in Wiryza, where it would be re-equipped and re-group its forces.

On August 31, the Spaniards were transferred from the XXXVIII Army Corp (A.C.) to the LIV A.C.. The Blue Division was assigned to a sector of the ring that surrounded Leningrad, relieving the 121<sup>st</sup> German Division. The sector formed a salient in front of one of the suburbs of Leningrad, Kolpino. The Division was part of the central sector of the attack.

#### THE LADOGA BATTLES

Operation North Light was finishing its preparations when Marshal Kirill Afanasievich Meretskov showed signs of life again. The Russians hoped that an attack on the northern front near Leningrad could help divert the German forces on the southern front near Stalingrad. By August 27, the Russians had been able to recover from the large losses suffered in the spring, and the 11<sup>th</sup> Army had been fully re-equipped. The Russian plan consisted of leaving from the south of Lake Ladoga and rushing toward Schlüsselburg while the 55<sup>th</sup> Russian Army moved to meet the 11<sup>th</sup> Army. With this attack the first battle of Ladoga began.

In the first battle, the Blue Division played an outstanding role, closing the enemy penetration to rearguard the 121<sup>st</sup> German Infantry Division. By September 21, despite repeated efforts of the Russians, the pressure they exerted began to decline in the entire sector. Although the Russians had not achieved their objective, indirectly they achieved something of which they were unaware; they had stopped Operation North Light.

Despite the failures of their first offensive, the Russians repeated their assault that winter. In operation Iskra (spark), the reconstituted 2<sup>nd</sup> Army would advance from the east, connecting with the 77<sup>th</sup> Army, which would advance from Leningrad, along the south side of Lake Ladoga. Both Armies were only separated by a narrow corridor occupied by forces of the XXVI German A.C. On January 12, Operation Iskra began -the second battle of Ladoga.

This time the Russian offensive was much more violent and the German troops that guarded the aforementioned corridor were annihilated. All the neighboring German units had to send reinforcements and the Blue Division contributed with one of its most noted battalions, the II Battalion (269<sup>th</sup> Regiment). On January 16, 1943, about 500 men of the battalion were



transferred to the combat area. By then the 2<sup>nd</sup> Army and the 77<sup>th</sup> Army had already connected. On January 22, in an attempt to break the enemy vanguards, the Spaniards rushed to the battle in the Mga-Posselok sector.

The cold was intense, 40° C below zero, the forests impenetrable, and the German lines were in such disarray that the Spaniards were hardly able to connect their flanks with the Germans. When the II Battalion (269<sup>th</sup> Regiment) deployed, the tactical situation was bad since the ground did not offer any cover, only firebreaks could serve as cover. The Russian forces were infinitely superior; two Divisions, the 11<sup>th</sup> and the 71<sup>st</sup> operated on the Spanish sector. At the end of the first day of operation Iskra the Spaniards suffered a 20% casualty rate, but they did not back down. When, on January 30, the Battalion was relieved, there were only 28 survivors. The Russians failed in the second battle of Ladoga because the siege of Leningrad continued.

After this battle, the front was restructured. The Blue Division was included in the L.A.C., commanded by General Philip Kleffel. The sector assigned to the Division included, Krasny-Bor and the October railroad.

#### THE KRASNY-BOR BATTLE

February 1943 began on the eastern front with the biggest defeat suffered by Hitler's armies to that time. On February 2, the 6<sup>th</sup> Army of Von Paulus, surrendered to General Vasili Chuikov, after having fought hopelessly in the ruins of Stalingrad.

Amid this victorious atmosphere, the Russian Command decided to break definitively the siege of Leningrad, by widening the corridor that connected the area of the Volchov with the besieged city. They decided to conduct two convergent attacks that would leave from Kolpino to the south and from Pogoste to the west.

In February, the Blue Division had only 16,863 men to cover a front of 30 kilometers. Seeing that the entire Division was on the front lines and practically without reserves, General Esteban Infantes ordered the 269<sup>th</sup> Regiment, if not attacked, to be ready to provide units. The 263<sup>rd</sup> Regiment received orders to form two companies of riflemen and another of machine guns based on its reserves and the "auxiliary" men. The general was even willing to appeal to the forces that were in "Villa Relief" (Viashtelewo) that were ready to return to Spain.

The forces deployed by the Blue Division in this area were: the 262<sup>nd</sup> Regiment, the Aunt Bernarda, the skiers' company, a group of antitank guns, the exploration group, a battalion of sappers, and one artillery group of 105 mm, reinforced with 2 batteries. The Germans promised to support the Spanish forces by sending an antitank company of 75 mm and another battery of

88 mm and a regiment of artillery. However this support never arrived. The positions assigned to the 262<sup>nd</sup> Regiment had a front of about 18 kilometers, which was covered in the following way: 2.5 kilometers covered by the III Battalion, the Aunt Bernarda covered up to 2 kilometers along the main route, the II Battalion covered 6 kilometers, and the rest was covered by the I Battalion.

These positions were in the way of the steam roller known as the 55<sup>th</sup> Russian Army, comprised of: 45<sup>th</sup> and 63<sup>rd</sup> Divisions of the Red Guards; 43<sup>rd</sup> and 72<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Divisions; two brigades of skiers; one motorized brigade; two tank battalions (between 80 and 100 T-43 and KW-1); two antitank regiments; between 150 and 200 batteries of artillery (approximately 800 guns); and an imprecise number of rocket launchers ("Stalin pipe organs"). This provided the Russians with the following superiority ratios: infantry 9 to 1; artillery 15 to 1; tanks and aviation: total superiority.

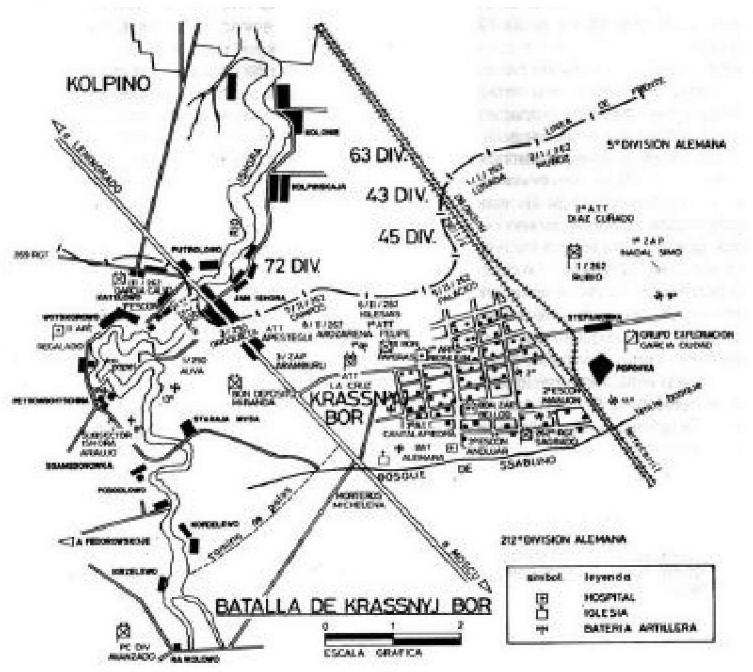


FIGURE 7<sup>15</sup>

On February 10 at 0645 hours, the attack on the Spanish positions began with an impressive artillery fire preparation. The 800 guns battered the Blue Division's first and second lines, as well as their observation posts, command posts, and artillery positions. This preparation would last nearly two hours, during which the Spanish *guripas* thought that the end

of the world had arrived. To make matters worse, a half hour after the attack had begun, they were attacked by 30 bombers and 20 fighters that collapsed the positions of the first line. In addition three Russian infantry divisions and one tank division attacked the front defended by the 262<sup>nd</sup> Regiment<sup>6</sup>.

At 1100 hours the situation was critical. The Russians had destroyed the first Spanish line, but miraculously the second was resisting, with the *guripas* standing in small clusters impeding the enemy penetration. The Russian infantry advanced from several points. In the attack, the 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> companies of the I Battalion (262<sup>nd</sup> Regiment) were wiped out as well as the 2<sup>nd</sup> company of the Aunt Bernarda, with the remnants of the latter having been surrounded since 1000 hours. In total, the Spaniards had lost nearly two Battalions. Reinforcements were needed, and when the forces in Villa-Relief were asked for help, 100 soldiers and all the officers that were waiting to return to Spain volunteered to go to Krasny-Bor.

General Kleffel soon realized the intensity and the intentions of the enemy attack and he feared for the integrity of his A.C.. Without knowing if the Spaniards could resist the Russian attack, he decided to begin gathering as many units as possible behind the Blue Division positions. But to accomplish this, he would need at least one day. So, the Spaniards were alone.

At 1515 hours, the German Air Force was committed to help the Spaniards. However, this support arrived too late. By that time, the biggest danger was the Soviet penetration at the bend of the Ishora river where the II Battalion (269<sup>th</sup> Regiment) received the order to contain the enemy advance at all cost. Fortunately, since the first hours of the afternoon, the enemy momentum had weakened. The enemy infantry now devoted itself to pillaging and looting the Spanish positions. The Russians had fallen into a self-made trap, and did not take advantage of their initial momentum to penetrate deeply into the Spanish positions without paying attention to the resistance pockets. They were now determined to destroy the pockets, thereby losing time, momentum and forces.

The Spaniards, with their stoic resistance, were winning the game, but at such a high price that they could end up with all their forces committed in combat. On the dawn of January 11, after repelling a new Russian attack, the Spaniards received the order to withdraw from Krasny-Bor. The 212<sup>nd</sup> German Division, commanded by General Hellmuth Reymann, would now be responsible for the defense of the sector established beyond the Ishora River.

In Krasny-Bor, the Spanish casualties were 3,645 from a total of 5,608 men involved in the battle. In addition, the enemy held more than 300 Spanish prisoners.

## THE BLUE DIVISION REPATRIATION

After the bloody battle of Krasny-Bor, the Russian Army seemed to have lost momentum and returned to a war of positions. But on March 19, the Russians attempted a large-scale attack to accomplish what they had not been able to do on February 10. The artillery of the 55<sup>th</sup> Russian Army began a potent artillery preparation on the Spanish positions along the Ishora River bank, while the 72<sup>nd</sup> Division tried to break the front. Again, the enemy was repelled in the Spanish sector.

During the 1942-1943 winter, the successive Russian attacks along the entire eastern Front did not achieve their final objectives, although they achieved some tactical successes. In the north, although the German artillery continued firing on Leningrad, the siege had weakened considerably and in some parts had been broken (although not in the Spanish sector). In the south, the Donetz basin was threatened, although Marshal Kleist had avoided the encirclement of his forces. In the center, the Russians had penetrated the German line west of Moscow. But it was not only on the eastern Front that the Germans' luck had taken a downward turn. In northern Africa the powerful Africa Korps began to decline, and German cities began to feel the devastating effects of the Allied bombardment.

All these events were followed with intense interest in Madrid, where Franco was subjected to multiple pressures by the Allies for the repatriation of the Blue Division. For Franco, this was a hard decision, because repatriating the Blue Division could mean that: 1. He ran away when things began to look bad for the Germans. 2. He ran the risk of a German military retaliation. 3. If the Division was not repatriated, he ran the risk of an Allied military intervention (at that time the Allies were already to the east and the south of Spain). 4. As the German victory in the eastern Front was already considered an entelechy, the entire Division was at risk.

Although the Blue Division continued having popular support, the fervor that had surrounded its birth had disappeared. Also, an important psychological factor should be kept in mind-nothing could do more harm to the Régime than a military failure.

On September 25, after Franco considered all the factors, he decided to repatriate the Blue Division, although he allowed those who wished to continue fighting to remain with the Germans. This decision did not become public until October 1, when the petition to repatriate was formally presented to Hitler. On October 12, the Blue Division was relieved by the 215<sup>th</sup> German Division. The Division withdrew to the southern riverbank of the Oranienbaum pocket, to be reorganized.

General Esteban Infantes soon received, with surprise, the order to repatriate the Division, although, the Spanish government accepted the Germans' proposal of maintaining a small unit

at the front, "necessary for ideological reasons." From this agreement the Spanish Legion of Volunteers, or *Blau Spanischen Freiwilliger Legion* for the Germans and, *Galubaya Leguion* for the Russian was born on November 17, 1943<sup>17</sup>.

On November 28, 1943, the Blue Legion, under the command of Colonel Antonio García Navarro, was composed of a total of 2,134 men<sup>18</sup>.

The main activities developed by the Blue Legion were: On December 1, 1943, "Operation Partisanshtshina" whose objective was to clear guerillas from the Oranienbaum pocket. On January 19, 1944, the protection of the retreat of the 121st German Division, when the German forces retreated to the "Panther" line (located on the eastern side of the Peipus River, between the towns of Pskov and Narva). And, finally, the outstanding defense of Lyuban. The Blue Legion was repatriated to Spain at the end of March 1944, and on April 17, the last units of the Legion arrived in Spain, putting an end to the last heroic demonstration of Spanish arms of the XX century.

## **ANALYSIS**

### **THE POLITICAL FRAMEWORK**

The change in the Spanish foreign policy from neutrality to non-belligerency was owed on one hand to the course of the war. With the French Army defeat, the victory of Germany seemed nearer, and Spain sought its place in the conference of peace beside the winners. However, Franco did not see this victory very clear, and he preferred not to enter the war without having the certainty of an imminent German victory.

On the other hand, Hitler's interest in the strategic situation of the Iberian Peninsula, especially Gibraltar, was the key for the control of the maritime provisioning of the British possessions in Africa. In exchange for its support, the Spanish government asked Germany for weapons, vehicles and fuel, things that the Germans could not spare for such an undecided ally as Spain (the Germans feared that Spain would use these weapons against them in case of a German invasion of Spain). Spain also outlined a series of political conditions in North Africa that were non-compatible with the interests of the French Vichy government (Germany's ally in 1941). Besides, Spain had knowledge of the existence of "Operation Félix", in which the Germans would take Gibraltar by going through Spain, with or without Spain's consent (something that reminded the Spaniards of Napoleon's performance one century before).

For that reason, a Spanish expeditionary force to Russia would win time for Spain and decrease the pressure that the Germans exercised on Spain to enter the war. At the same time,

a Spanish elite unit would demonstrate to the Germans, as well to the Allies, the expensive price that a further invasion to Spain could be.

From the domestic policy's point of view, the massive enlistment of the main leaders of the Falange facilitated the concentration of power in Franco's hands. For when the first repatriated Falangists arrived in Spain, Franco had already consolidated his power in the Falangist organization, thereby eliminating the national socialist aspirations for Spain that this organization had.

## THE RECRUITMENT

The organization of the Blue Division was a model of speed and effectiveness that could not be replicated today in Spain. The main characteristic, which would have to be closely studied, was the extraordinary speed of the enlistment, distribution of the volunteers, and to make the Division ready for deployment (from June 27 to July 5, 1941).

The key to the success of the Division in combat can be found in the selection of personnel. During the Division recruitment, a good selection was possible because of a high number of superior candidates for the number of vacancies (42 candidates for each available rank and file position in the first enlistment of the Division). Back then, both feelings of revenge against communism, and Spanish patriotism were main factors in the high number of volunteers.

One of the main strength of the Division was the way it organized the volunteers (even the officers were volunteers). The Division positions were filled from the top down. In the first phase (officers selection), the Spanish Army selected five colonels. These colonels selected their immediate subordinates based on combat experience and personal knowledge of the subordinate. The subordinate would use this process to select his subordinates, and so on. This process provided a high cohesion among the officers.

In the second phase (selection of the troops), the troops selection followed other approaches: the volunteers had to be an enthusiastic Falangist, had to have combat experience, be in good shape, and even attractive. In addition, the volunteer had to have a high intellectual capacity with which to transform the simple soldier into a combatant able to make decisions in isolated combat situations and to allow him to learn quickly.

## CONCLUSIONS

The Blue Division developed a very important role in the Spanish political life of the 1940's. First, it satisfied the desires of the Spanish people to fight against communism. Second, it allowed Franco to avoid the continuous German demands for Spain to enter the war. Third, it

facilitated the concentration of power in Franco's hands. Finally, the Division served as an important element during the negotiations with the Allies.

The Division revealed the great importance of achieving a high cohesion together with excellent selection of its rank and file, and the resolve of its officers in order to carry out an outstanding performance among all the units that fought in the German North Army Group.

WORD COUNT=5933

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Torres, Francisco. *La División Azul 50 Años Después*. Madrid: Editorial Fuerza Nueva, 1991, 31.

<sup>2</sup> Ros Agudo, Manuel. *La Guerra Secreta de Franco (1939-1945)*. Madrid: Critica Contrastes, 2002, 2.

<sup>3</sup> Torres, Francisco. *La División Azul 50 Años Después*. Madrid: Editorial Fuerza Nueva, 1991, 47.

<sup>4</sup> Kleinfield, Gerald R. and Tambs, Lewis A. *La División española de Hitler*. Madrid: Editorial San Martín, 1983, 25.

<sup>5</sup> Torres, Francisco. *La División Azul 50 Años Después*. Madrid: Editorial Fuerza Nueva, 1991, 53

<sup>6</sup> The Division was popularly known as the Blue Division because its first members (most of them Falange members) left Spain dressed in the traditional blue shirt of Falange. They always wore the collar of the Blue shirt showing above the collar of the German uniform and in the end, this habit became the identity sign of the Division.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 66-67.

<sup>8</sup> Esteban Infantes, Emilio, Teniente General. *La División Azul. Donde empieza Asia*. Barcelona: Editorial AHR, 1956, 20.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 50.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 53.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 66.

<sup>12</sup> Vadillo, Fernando. *División Azul. La Gesta Militar Española del Siglo XX*. Madrid: Editorial Este Oeste, 1991, cartographical appendix.

<sup>13</sup> Vidal, Cesar. "Intento Hitler derribar a Franco." 1 June 2004. Available from <<http://www.libertaddigital.com>>, 2.

<sup>14</sup> Esteban Infantes, Emilio, Teniente General. *La División Azul. Donde empieza Asia*. Barcelona: Editorial AHR, 1956., 124.

<sup>15</sup> Vadillo, Fernando. *División Azul. La Gesta Militar Española del Siglo XX*. Madrid: Editorial Este Oeste, 1991, cartographical appendix.

<sup>16</sup> Rosaleny Jimenez, Francisco, Teniente, *Medalla Militar Individual, División Española de Voluntarios (Frente de Rusia) Septiembre 1942-Febrero 1943, prisionero en los campos de concentración de la Unión Soviética 11 Febrero 1943-2 Abril 1954*, typed manuscript, n.p., 1970, 2.



<sup>17</sup> Vadillo, Fernando. *Balada Final de la División Azul*. Granada: García Hispan, Editor Sociedad Limitada, 1996, 14.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 37-40.



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